



CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER AS REFLECTED IN THE TEXTBOOKS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

A textbook is a concise source of material which helps teachers and students to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitude and values within a specific period of time. It plays an important role in shaping the future of the young minds. With the changing political scenario of Assam from a traditional mood of teaching to a specific class of the society to the advent of the colonial administration with new avenues of teaching subject lessons the dissemination of knowledge had taken a new turn. The establishment of educational institutions were directed with a motive of producing local administrative assistants with minimum wages. While the traditional mood was still prevalent, there emerged new agencies like the Christian Missionaries and the colonial government. The introduction of Bengali and English language broadened the horizon of the Assamese people on one hand and made pupils reluctant to education on the other for the language of dissemination of knowledge i.e., Bengali was unknown to most of the students. The lure for governmental jobs attracted a portion of students from the upper class to become the initial batches of students in the newly founded schools in Gauhati (1835), Sibsagar (1841) and other village schools established during the primary days of the company rule. The study is an attempt to investigate the educational policies and the curriculum of the colonial Government in the nineteenth century. The study will be done with selected contents of some textbooks circulated in the latter half of the nineteenth century which draws a significant light into the perception of the educated writers and the students about the society.

KEYWORDS: Colonial Education, Christian Missionaries, Textbooks, Hemchandra Baruah, Panindranath Gogoi, Social History

INTRODUCTION

History shows us that education has long been an ideal expression determined by the needs of the rulers. Textbooks written by adults for children present a conscious articulation of new culture or a cultural design for children. Colonial textbooks were a form of bureaucratic control as the curriculum and textbooks were prescribed by the highest bureaucratic authorities and taught in the government aided schools symbolizes state authority. For the British authority, imparting knowledge to the natives involved a deep sense of paternal generosity. It can be observed that in the making of British Indian historiography and colonial knowledge there was a genuine curiosity and excitement along with fairly obvious links with the colonial power. The British as utterly alien rulers wanted to know about the traditions and prejudices of their subjects. Extraction of revenue and dispensation of justice and maintenance of order demanded knowledge of past administrative practices and meticulous enquiry into possible causes became standard practice after every rebellion. History became the principle instrument for inculcating the stereotypical dichotomy between the backward, immobile orient as contrast with the dynamic Christian or the scientific west, thus simultaneously buttressing British self-confidence and reminding Indians of their lowly place in the world's scheme of things¹. Officials on the ground in Calcutta and other major cities around the subcontinent attempted to gain extra funding to establish new schools as they felt a need for new opportunities for their subjects as there was the question of the condition of the production and reception of academic knowledge, its relationship with different kinds

of common sense². However, there was little effort to create a consistent curriculum across British India during the period of Company rule. The decision of the local government to sponsor the idle and higher level secondary education in Assam in contradistinction to its all India policy of supporting education for the few makes sense in the light of the state's attempt to disseminate some useful knowledge among the population at large, with the hope that this would ultimately produce changes in lifestyle and habits, including the later to take up commercial labour service in the long run.³

OBJECTIVE

The study is an attempt to investigate the educational policies and how the curriculum of colonial government signifies the idea of caste, class and gender of the nineteenth century Assam.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is prepared with historical analytical method with the help of primary and secondary sources. Primary source includes contemporary writings of the nineteenth century including the journals and textbooks along with the official and archival documents of the period. The secondary sources include books and journals published on the topic.

Scope of the Study:

As this is a very broad area of study, this paper will put emphasis on the background of the development of the Assamese textbooks and the idea of the contemporary society as reflected in the selected contents of some of the Assamese

Textbooks circulated during the later half of nineteenth century viz. written by Hemchandra Barua and Panindranath Gogoi.

Introduction of modern education in Assam and new subjects:

The colonial state right from its inception appeared concerned about the need for promoting education among the natives of Assam. In particular, Mr. David Scott the first agent of the East India Company took interest in the promotion of the indigenous system of imparting education. He opened eleven schools, mostly in lower Assam viz., Guwahati, Nilachal, Desh Durrang, Hajo, Nowgong and Biswanath. Students passing out from these schools were offered jobs under the Government. It was mentioned in the archival documents recovered by Jugendra Narayan Bhuyan from the Nogaon district archive that “An education in Calcutta, it is hoped, not only be the means of supplying them with useful knowledge, but would liberalise their feelings, enlarge their minds and qualify them to become the instruments of much agricultural and social improvement.”⁴ As opined by two commissioners W. Money and Stockwell “the reason usually urged by the relatives of the wards against sending them to Calcutta were the separation from their mothers, the distance and unhealthiest of Calcutta, the association with youth of low caste and the infidel principles imbued at the Hindu College.”⁵ Keeping in view with the opinion of the Commissioners the colonial government soon decided to establish a Seminary School in the district headquarters. This was further documented that the parents and guardians should send their sons to the government schools if he had no emergency causes regarding his presence in school. The principal or the headmaster were asked to keep records of the attendance of the students and send a progress report of the pupils the District Collector within every six months.⁶

With regard to the kind of education to be given the first object was to teach the wards, those branches of knowledge which will instruct them in the independent management of their estates whenever they come to age. A familiar acquaintance with arithmetic and a power of reading and writing the English and vernacular languages with facilities were necessary for the purpose and opportunity was added to read history, geography and element of science which have a reference to agricultural improvement. On 31st August the ten Revenue Commissioner Francis Jenkins had circulated the order of the Revenue Board among the District Collectors regarding a plan for securing a proper education to the public wards. These included with a provision for superior education of the children of the principal inhabitants into consideration with a view to erect a school at the station headquarter for the education of the children of the *Rajas, Patgiris* and the other principal native gentry.⁷

In 1837, Captain Brodie, the Officiating Collector of Nowgong, plan for the establishment of schools for the instruction of the people in simple rules of arithmetic, reading and writing. The plan soon got the recommendation of the Board.⁸ Gordon, the then Commissioner, believed that in the course of time, through the education imparted in the government schools a class will be raised up from among the Assamese scholars equally qualified and far more popular to undertake the important duties which

are developed upon the village schoolmasters.⁹ The annual report submitted to the Chief Commissioner Jenkins on 1st January 1842, Gordon mentioned about his observation that he have had many Assamese youth having intelligence and aptitude to learn.

In 1841, with a view to effecting a vigilant control and introducing a uniform system of instructions, William Robinson, the then Headmaster of The Gauhati School was made the Inspector of Schools.¹⁰ On 1844, the Bengal Governor passed another decision for the employment of distinguish scholar from the government schools in the public school with preference to others and ordered to keep the periodical records with specific dates.

In 8th April, 1855, Robinson send 12 copies of Bengali books narration of Ganga Canal for distribution among the libraries in connection with the government schools. In reply the Collector of Nowgong, Walter mentioned that there is not a single library in the district and only a few books in any of the schools. In the same year, Walter wrote that the schools required to be furnished with Assamese books free of cost if someone wished to be successful in educating the people.¹¹ He wrote a letter to Jenkins in April, 1855, that the Sub-Assistant Commissioner Anandaram Dhekial Phukan(1829-1859) was sent to inspect the schools where he found that, the boys should be first taught in their mother-tongue Assamese and if it is desired to be more successful in educating the people they have to procure Assamese books of instruction from the American Baptist Missionary Press, Seeksaghur.¹² By 1856, government vernacular schools were set up at the headquarters of each of the five districts of Assam Proper¹³. He further suggested (a) the establishment of Normal Schools to train up a body of teachers and the enhancement of salaries of them, (b) publication of a series of translation in Assamese of popular works on different branches of knowledge written in European and regional languages and also (c) the creation of a separate department for the study of Sanskrit in the several vernacular schools¹⁴. By introduction of Assamese as the medium of instruction Dekhial Phukan did not mean that Bengali should be altogether abolished. On the contrary, it should be cultivated as a language indispensable to complete the course of vernacular education and that standard Bengali works should be introduced in the higher classes¹⁵.

Vernacular Textbooks:

The choice of vernacular instead of English for imparting education in school made it difficult for the British to procure books which had to be brought all the way from Calcutta, given the fact that Bengali was the official vernacular of the province. The approved list of textbooks in both English and Bengali used in all recognized schools in Assam province were usually those that were prepared by the Textbook Committee, Bengal, Calcutta, and sanction for use in Bengal schools by director of Public Instructions in Bengal.¹⁶ However, in case of Bengali books in particular the standing instruction was that ‘no Bengali books that are not approved by the Calcutta Text Book Committee are to be used in Assam schools, with the exceptions of some elementary books on land measurement in the Surma

Valley.¹⁷ Padmanath Guhain Baruah wrote in his autobiography that the textbooks taught in the schools of Bengal were similar with the textbooks taught in the schools of Assam in respective classes of middle schools viz., the first, second and third part of *Sishu Siksha* by Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, *Padyapath* (1st, 2nd and 3rd part) written by Jadunath Chattopadhyay, *Bodhudaya* by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, *Ramer Rajabhishek* by Tarasankar Vidyaratna, *Madvabakhak* by Hafezakrita etc. These books inspired the Assamese students to write books in Assamese language¹⁸. There was no standard textbook, grammar or dictionary in an Indian language. Instructions were imparted in Village schools in Bengali on Elementary reading, writing and arithmetic while at Sadar School, there existed two independent departments of English and Bengali. Yate's Elements of Natural Philosophy, English Grammar, and the use of globe, arithmetic, translation and composition; while curriculum at senior level consisted of Marshman's History of India, Homer's Iliad, Elements of Natural Philosophy, Geography, Arithmetic, composition and translation. Provisions were also made for the teaching of classical subjects: Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian.¹⁹

It may also be stated that though a number of religious and history books were written in Assamese language with a mixture of Bengali in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the textbooks for the school students were procured from Bengal and the publications of the Christian missionaries press. Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan (1829-1859) was one of the pioneer in writing Assamese books for student viz. *Asomiya Larar Mitra* (1853). The book consisted of the moral lessons, articles on plants and animals, land and people and scientific studies of the contemporary time. It may be observed that the writings were inspired by the textbooks of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) viz. *Jivancharit* (1849) and *Bodhuday* (1851). Again the English books Encyclopedia Chambers' Biographies by Moore, Rudiments of Knowledge were popular in Calcutta at that time. In the January 1851 issue of Orunodoi, an advertisement of school books for sale was published with the books viz., Juvenile tracts, Bare Motora or Assamese Premier, First reading book in assamese, Elementary Arithmetic in Assamese(First and second part).²⁰

The Assamese language was reintroduced in 1872 when, George Campbell, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, made Assamese the medium of instruction in all the schools of the Valley of the Brahmaputra Soon after the introduction of Assamese language in the court and schools of the Assam province the needs of Assamese textbooks become urgent. The government administration announced prize money in 1873 to encourage the writing of Assamese textbooks. Hemchandra Barua (1835-1896) wrote *Asomiya Larar Adipath* 1st, 2nd and 3rd part (1875- 79) and got the prize money of five hundred rupees. The book was published by C. B Lewis at the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta as the Assamese premier published by authority for the use in the school of the Assam Province. This book can be placed with the *Charupath* (1st, 2nd and 3rd part) (1853-59) written by Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1886). Hemchandra wrote *Pathmala* in the line of *Asoamiya Larar Mitra* and *Bodhudaya* which was a textbook for the class till the twenties of the twentieth century. A list of Assamese textbooks were

included in the *Report of the Progress of Education in Assam 1892-95*, *Laraputhi* and *Kabyakusum* written by Gunabhiram Barua(1837-1898), *Sikhsasar* written by Padmahas Goswami, *Hitakatha* part I and II written by Purnakanta Sarma, *Ujupath* by Baladev Mahanta(1850-1895), *Jnanankur* part I and II by Nara Nath Mahanta, *Jnanudai* and *Larabodh* written by Lambodar Bora, *Nitikatha* and *Hitakatha* written by Jajneswar Sarma, *Kabitasar* by Ratneswar Mahanta. Regarding women writer to publish textbook were Padmabati Devi Phukanani's *Hitasadhika* and *Sudharmar Upakhyan* and Bishnupriya Devi wrote *Nitikatha*.

Gaa Vale Rakhibor Upai (1883) or Way to health was a translation of English book written by Hemchandra Barua which remained a textbook for a long time. Munshi Sakhawat Ali translated Dr. Cunningham's Sanitary Premier and of "Way to Health" which was published by Office of Director of Public Instruction, Assam, Shillong was also an approved textbook by the Nowgong Textbook committee. Catechism of Dr. Cunningham's Sanitary Premier was written by Bapuram Sarma, *Swasthyabidhi* by Naranath Mahanta were also introduced as school textbooks.

Panindranath Gogoi (1871-1900) was another pioneer in the writing of textbooks for the school children. He was appointed as second teacher of the Dhakuakhana government middle school where the headmaster was the renowned writer of Arithmetic textbook *Patigonit*, Madhab Chandra Das. In 1884, Panindranath Gogoi went to Guwahati Normal School where the medium of learning was in Bengali and the renowned teachers of the time Brajjapati Banerjee was the Head Master, others being Jaychandra Chakravarty, Narayanchandra Sharma Vidyabhusan and the only Assamese teacher Holiram Medhi. Here Panindranath Gogoi learnt about teaching pedagogy, psychology and various theories of fruitful teaching²¹. He also came into contact with Hemchandra Barua during his stay at Guwahati. With the experiences in the normal school and his contact with the illuminating teachers he published his textbooks *Larasiksha*(*Agsuwa, Majorsuwa, Seshorsuwa*), *Gananaputhi*. The introduction of riddles and idioms in head of all pages of *Larasiksha* was a novel idea to the textbooks in Assamese language. He wrote another books viz. *Asamiya lorar Bhugol,Gananar Adiputhi*.²²

Padmanath Gohain Barooah(1871-1946) compiled two textbooks, *Sahitya Samgraha* and *Niti Shiksha*, both of these school books were fairly received for a long time in Assam. He had to his credit a minimum of twelve textbooks. Text-books in both English and Bengali which had been approved by the Text-book Committee at Calcutta were accepted in Assam, with a few additions made by the Director of Education. All recognized schools were required to use the books included in that list and no others.²³ In 1893, Padmanath Gohain Barooah in association with Panindranath Gogoi published the *Sahitya Samgraha* – a compilation of twenty-three prose items and nineteen poems. It contained lessons on philosophy, morals, economics, science, history, old literature and patriotism. In 1896, Padmanath compiled two books on moral education for the lower and upper primary levels. This series, called *Niti*

Shiksha were adoptions from the English work, *Chamber's Moral Class Book*²⁴. The seven chapters in the text taught duties and obligations of children to family and relations, animals, teachers, the learned, friends and subordinates. Further, the book taught values of labour, perseverance and self-reliance, good health and morality. The language of the instructions was lucid befitting the students of primary classes. These lessons had an abiding influence on many children for life.

The Idea of Caste and Class:

The introductory sentence of the book *Pathmala* one of the premier written by Hemchandra Baruah starts with addressing the boys and praising the government authority for its generosity in establishing schools in the province. This shows the pattern and attitude of the creative class toward gender, education and administration. It has already been discussed that there was an urgency of the administration to create a class of intelligent labour among the indigenous people possessing some useful skills and practical knowledge²⁶ and spread the ideology of the imperial rule.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan received his early education in the Government Seminary, Guwahati which was the first centre of English education in Assam. Anandaram brought out an Assamese primer for the benefit of the next generation Assamese, *Asamiya Larar Mitra* (Friend of Assamese Boys) in 1849. Here he incorporated introductory themes of world geography, rivers, mountains, cities, political geography, agricultural production, business and customs of the people; their character and religion as well as geography and topography of Assam.

Hemchandra Barua in the book *Pathmala* addressed the students that an educated person of any caste has respect in the society.²⁷ He has emphasized upon the usefulness of physical exercises. In the article *Porishromor Sugun*²⁸ it was noted that all human beings require to work for their upliftment. A person should not hesitate to work and take upon harvesting and agriculture for their livelihood. In the article *Krishi Banijya abong onyanyo byabosai*²⁹ a number of new professions were acquainted with the students. It was noted that there is a notion of considering a farmer as inferior to the officials. But both of them contribute to the development of the society.

In the article *Jatiyo Prem*³⁰ included in the textbook of Panindranath Gogoi *Lorasikshar Seshorsuwa* the writer discussed that religious and caste differences were the root cause for the lack of patriotism among the people. He also emphasized upon establishment of schools with techniques of agricultural teachings like the curriculum of other countries for the practical knowledge of students.³¹ Another article by Bikhy Chandra Biswas describes that we should respect everyone irrespective of caste or class.

Orunodoi the first Assamese journal also recorded various subjects important for the students. In the article, *Conduct towards inferior and superior*³² the writer instructs the students to give equal respect to all. The editorial note points out that the farmers should be respected after the king and the masters as they cultivate and feed the society. In the article, *How*

*Parents teach their children*³³ Nidhi Levie Farewell suggests the parents to gently teach the children through their works and activities. *The article Industry is better than gold*³⁴ the writer gives example of the benefit of labour. However in the advertisement on the books for sale, it could be found that there was sale of the diary of Monthly account for servants, workmen with printed lines³⁵.

Gender in Textbooks:

Wood's dispatch in 1854 recognized encouragement of female education as a matter of the Company's policy. Public indifference, however, hampered the progress of female education in the country. Women education has been constrained and modulated so as to reinforce tradition rather than to challenge it. Nonetheless, there is also evidence that the seeds of change have been sown. If the previous century –as Gulam Murshid and Meredith Brothwick have demonstrated in their research on Bengal in 1849-1905 was essentially to reproduce the ideal of the traditional Hindu women in a modern package, could the advance of women education kept contained within the limited agenda in the twentieth century? Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have convincingly argued that the creation of the new form of patriarchy was at the head of the agenda of the early colonial elite in their social reform and educational endeavours.³⁶

In Assam, the Baptist Missionaries emphasized the education of women and to that end they started boarding schools for girls at each of their stations.³⁷ The wife of Oliver Cutter, one of the first American Baptist Missionaries in Assam, opened the first missionary girls' school at Sadiya in 1837. Then girls' schools came up in the Brahmaputra valley and in Naga and Garo hills by the effort of the wife of Nathan Brown (1807-86), Miles Bronson and the wife of Baker. The first primary girls' school was started at Sibsagar by the year 1860-61.³⁸

According to the official report for these years, Assam offered eight special lower primary scholarships from the provincial funds, five special upper primary scholarships and three special middle scholarships for girls. For expansion of female education, during 1906-07, thirty one scholarships of various grades were held throughout the province by girls, namely one junior, five middle, four upper primary, twenty one lower primary³⁹. Still the education scenario in Assam was not encouraging until a few more decades. The opening up of secular education to women was a big step ahead for their liberation.

But in reality, the ground was not yet ready for such a change in social attitude. There was no social support for female education. Even among the elite section, Benudhar Rajkhowa's wife Ratnakumari supported education for girls only in isolation. She never thought of higher education and co-education.⁴⁰ The title of most textbooks of the nineteenth century addresses the male population viz. *lorapath, lorasiksha, lorabodh* etc. These textbooks were more like a manual where a mother is portrayed as the ultimate idea of sacrifice and she is to be worshiped by the son.

Hemchandra Barua addressed the boys in the book

Pathmala(1884) as *Balakbilak*⁴¹ and continues to discuss with the boys about the development of moral habits of boys. Instances were however made in asking the pupils to give proper respect to women and keep away from illicit relations. His idea of women as a human being can be observed in his writing on *Stree Siksha, Atmojiboncharit* (his biography).

In the article *Tumar Marak Sewa Bhokti Koriba*⁴² included in the *Lora-Siksha Seshorsuwa*, the writer Panindranath Gogoi included two examples of the sacrifice of a mother for the sake of her son reflecting the idea of domesticity of women. In *Lora-sikshar Majorsuwa*⁴³ it is written that the husband is the supreme god in the life of women.

In the article *Pitri Matri*⁴⁴, published in the Lower Primary school textbook, *Jnanodaya* the women is praised as the savior of her son(*kesua lora ata*) without any fear for her life. In the article *Sontanor Kortabya Kam*⁴⁵ a Russian daughter Catherine faced all the hardship in helping her parents to overcome their exile and bring them back at the cost of her life. Women or a mother is compared with relaxation and sleep i.e, which brings refreshment. The other articles of the book were manuals of duty and responsibility addressing the boy students. The writing of Ratneswar Mahanta also shows the vulnerability and grief of a woman at the loss of her husband in the poem *Potni-bilap*⁴⁶ included in the textbook *Kabitasar Seshorsuwa*. The poem *Gawalia buwari*⁴⁷ a romantic picture of dedication of women toward the family is depicted. In other articles like *Swadhinata ne swessasar*⁴⁸ and *Ghoimir Kortabya aru Stree siksha*⁴⁹ a conservative attitude of the writer could be noticed as he opposes the idea of women education in modern norms and household duties as the ideal work of women. It may be because a few girl students were enrolled in the schools. In the entire subcontinent, literacy among women was only 0.8 per cent in 1901. The number of girls enrolled for every hundred boys was 12 at the primary and 14 at the secondary stages. The total number of women in higher education in the subcontinent was 264.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be observed that the introduction of Assamese language and the publication of Assamese textbooks were important phenomena in the nineteenth century Assam. The newly educated Assamese intelligentsia came up with confidence after the restoration of Assamese language. They took upon themselves the responsibility of regenerating Assamese. Development of the print media contributed to the spread of literacy and cultural consciousness. The growth of native press fostered all forms of collective action. Though it was in a preliminary stage, a number of textbooks were written and published and permitted by the textbook Committee for circulation. Other than the prescribed books of textbook Committee, there were many other published books for the students. In his article in *Jonaki*, *Kitap Basa Committee r Kitap Basoni: Jibonadarsha Ratneswar* Mahanta discussed that the book *Jibonadarsha* written by Nilkumud Baruah from Sibsagar was rejected by book selection committee, Nowgong at the instance that ‘the book contains short accounts of the lives of some persons from

which one can learn nothing which may imitated or followed advantageously’⁵¹ As because the books were the culmination of the ideas imbibed in a specific society it can be concluded that they mirrored the contemporary society as it was conceived by the writer. The study focused that the textbooks reflected a glimpse of the idea of caste, class and gender of the period. At the same time it also created a group of educated people who imbibed western ideas and helped the government as their administrative officials. It can be concluded that the colonial textbooks, which were characterized by an unwavering belief in the superiority of western culture and values, invited their readers to identify not with the backwardness of the Indian past but with the enlightenment of the British present.⁵²

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